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Dear Editor/Producer:

Roosevelt's New Deal and the creation of the Works Progress Administration brought about social, economic, and cultural changes that still ripple through American society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the extraordinary and unexamined histories of artists Alice Neel, Augusta Savage, Georgette Seabrooke, Lenore Thomas Straus, Elizabeth Olds, and Pablita Velarde. In ***Bohemians on the Breadline: The Radical Women Artists of Roosevelt's New Deal*** (on-sale: December 8, 2026), Lauren Arrington presents a captivating group biography of women who seized a unique opportunity and used it to produce work that challenged racism, capitalism, and inequality. Their enduring works of public art are a reminder of the turbulent and exciting lives they led.

For artists, employment through the WPA was a matter of survival. After the Wall Street crash in 1929, there was no longer a market for artists to make a living from their work and jobs in other sectors quickly dried up. For Alice Neel, a steady weekly income allowed her to rent her own apartment where she could leave behind volatile and abusive relationships. Elizabeth Olds felt her government wage "freed [her] from the 'rat-race' and competition of the market-place." Government employment wasn't just about creating art, it was also about teaching art. Augusta Savage and others gave back, sharing their gifts with their communities.

As the artists Arrington profiles were making strides for women's rights and racial equality, their personal lives were just as unconventional and revolutionary. Arrington recounts their love affairs, mental health crises, complicated family relationships, and evolving political affiliations. At a time when new opportunities led to new ways of living, these women took full advantage to chart new paths.

When the New Deal programs were dissolved at the end of the decade, much of the art produced during that period was destroyed or forgotten. The surviving works were absorbed into the landscape of everyday life, seldom understood as more than a cultural artifact. Because it's always there, it's rarely seen. But these were labors of love by women artists who put themselves at risk during tumultuous times.

About the Author

LAUREN ARRINGTON is the recipient of the Robert & Ina Caro Award from Biographers International Organization, a National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholars Award, and visiting research fellowships to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Cambridge University; Boston College; and Trinity College Dublin. Her writing has appeared in *LitHub*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Public Books*, and elsewhere. Born and raised in Florida, Lauren lived in the U.K. and Ireland for twenty years before returning to her home state. She earned her doctorate at Oxford University.

Thanks for keeping this in mind for coverage in December and beyond. I look forward to being in touch!

As ever,

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BOHEMIANS ON THE BREADLINE: The Radical Women Artists of Roosevelt's New Deal
By Lauren Arrington
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TALKING POINTS

- The Federal Arts Project was one of the most unique social experiments in US history: mass funding of art meant for the public. The creation of art that adorned parks, housing projects, and municipal buildings spoke truth to Eleanor Roosevelt's anticipation that "if we have been able to … even make a beginning in widening the interest of people as a whole in art, we have reaped a really golden harvest out of what many of us feel have been barren years." At a time when government support of the arts is at an all-time low, it makes the art that was preserved from these years that much more valuable.

- The arts and culture programs of the WPA would represent less than 1 percent of its total expenditure, yet these projects were one of its greatest legacies. Under the umbrella agency of Federal One, which included the Federal Writer's Project, Federal Music Project, Feder Theater Project, and Federal Art Project, forty thousand writers and artists were put to work.

- Arts-focused WPA programs were particularly beneficial for women. Federal One's programs employed women, who were excluded from most of the New Deal's opportunities. Homelessness rates for women skyrocketed after the Wall Street crash, and the arts programs helped with women's employment which in turn helped with the housing crisis. In 1935, the WPA instituted a rule forbidding sexual discrimination, thanks in large part to Eleanor Roosevelt's hard work. 30-40 percent of newly hired artists working on federal projects were women. The changes to women's employment in government at this time had a lasting effect on national institutions and the history of art.

- The artworks that these women created were challenged and sometimes suppressed by government administrators. An anti-lynching sculpture by Lenore Thomas, intended for a series celebrating the Preamble to the Constitution was cancelled for being too political and engaging with anti-lynching legislation that FDR did not support. A mural for Harlem Hospital by Georgette Seabrooke was held up in a dispute with the hospital's administrators because it depicted Black figures, which the administrators thought would hamper gentrification. A Puebloan artist, Pablita Velarde, had the subjects of her paintings for the National Park Service dictated to her, despite the incorrect ethnology research and Velarde's own firsthand experience of her culture. The push-pull dynamic between federal support for the arts and the restrictions sometimes placed on those artworks speaks to our present day.

- Black artists were the last hired and first fired on the WPA art projects. They were often also limited to low-paying jobs and were excluded from supervisory positions. Augusta Savage together with Charles Alston, Gwendolyn Bennett, and others actively lobbied Eleanor Roosevelt and Mayor La Guardia when young Black women's jobs were the first to be cut. The artists had extensive discussions about artistic autonomy, opportunity, and its importance to Black freedom movements. The jacket image of *Bohemians on the Breadline* shows Gwendolyn Bennett, Augusta Savage's successor as Director of the Harlem Community Art Center, with her lover, the artist Norman Lewis. They are at a protest against funding cuts to the WPA art projects, and their sign "Become Art Conscious" shows the link between the artists network and social identity.

Praise for

BOHEMIANS ON THE BREADLINE

by Lauren Arrington

"Beautifully researched and conceived, *Bohemians on the Breadline* is a timely, compelling reminder of how the arts flourished and sustained a nation when championed by public leadership and investment."
—Natalie Dykstra, author of *Chasing Beauty: The Life of Isabella Stewart Gardner*

"Lauren Arrington expertly uncovers the vibrant and overlooked stories of women artists who worked, struggled, and created under the auspices of the New Deal arts programs and beyond. This is a meticulous and timely portrait of a remarkable group of undaunted women who translated the social turmoil of the Great Depression into bold visual statements about race, gender, labor, and identity. This necessary, original, and richly detailed work of feminist history will change the way we understand American art of the 1930s."
—Heather Clark, author of *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*

"An essential, history-shifting story of women artists working in the United States during the New Deal. Arrington's agile prose and deep archival research (No FBI file goes unturned) reveals the conflicting but necessary role of art in national crisis and personal identity—and feels freshly relevant today. Long after I'd finished reading, many of its details lingered like lanterns strung across the shadows of history."
—Prudence Peiffer, author of *The Slip: The New York City Street That Changed American Art Forever*

"A moving, powerful and beautifully written account of a fascinating historical moment, through the eyes of a brilliant array of women artists whose works speak as much to our time as their own."
—Francesca Wade, author of *Gertrude Stein: An Afterlife*